

# Breaking the Silence: The Struggle Against Gender Violence in Universities

by

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Blest as the immortal gods is he,  
The youth who fondly sits by thee,  
And hears and sees thee, all the while,  
Softly speaks and sweetly smile.

—Sappho, “Ode to a loved one”

Jesús Gómez – Pato – used to talk to Paulo Freire about love and about how he dealt with it within his research. Pato was Paulo’s best friend in Spain. They both believed in the “power of feelings” and more than once they talked about writing a book together entitled “Pedagogy of the Shine in the Eyes”, an expression which Pato used a great deal and which embraces the idea of the need to unite passion and love in the same person – one of the key areas of his research. Neither he nor Paulo had time to write it.

Even so, Pato dedicated his years as a university professor and researcher to work and study about the deepest roots of gender violence. In order to do this he collaborated with SAFO Women’s Group (the gender studies group at CREA) and participated in numerous talks, conferences, and symposia where he explained the results of his scientific work.

At CREA, the research center that he participated in, he started a research program on love theories. This program analyzed various theoretical approaches to love, as well as their relationship to the processes of socialization within history that are now perceived as being “natural,” and their link to gender violence. The need to work on the concept of “preventative socialization of gender violence” arose from his work and his collaboration with SAFO Women’s Group:

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The socialization processes which we have undergone throughout history, which have promoted violence and have irrevocably linked violence with passion (as well as kindness with boredom), have created what has been (and still is) a deep root for this problem: the current system of affective-sexual relationships and, more specifically, everything which is related to attraction. For this reason, we must delve into the complexity of relationships and into history and the socialization processes aligned to it... What are the values that the people we are attracted to have? Is violence genetic, socially created or a mixture of both? Can it be changed? Are our tastes and desires instinctive, "chemical", or socially created? Can we change them? (*Author's translation*, Gómez, 2005: 21).

Pato deeply believed in the possibility of eradicating gender violence through people's capacity to change their desires, tastes, preferences and choices and to achieve satisfactory affective and sexual relationships. He would state this everywhere that he participated. His most significant work within this program is his book *El amor en la sociedad del riesgo. Una tentativa educativa* [Love in the Risk Society. An Educational Approach] (2004). There, he analyzes adolescents' and youths' models of attraction and their links to gender violence. Conducting a critical analysis of their approaches and contributing his own approach, he also reviews social theories and authors who have dealt with love ( Pato had shared his intellectual concerns on this topic with Ulrich Beck and Jon Elster as well as Freire). He also introduced adolescents' voices in his work, along with many quotations from the adolescent magazines he analyzed. All of this shaped what is currently one of the most significant theories in this field.

Pato felt a great deal of respect for life and he wanted everyone to be able to live their life with the same excitement and enthusiasm which he lived for the last 14 years. For this reason, everywhere he was invited to explain his theoretical contributions, he connected with the audience and created a huge impression on them; sometimes this resulted in questions, sometimes in affirmations, and sometimes in attacks. Not everyone liked to hear about the need to break the silence and to open a public debate about these issues; this meant that too many things needed to be questioned.

## Gender Violence and Spanish Universities

If a young university student or a woman working in the university (right across the board from a cleaner to a head of department) experiences sexual harassment, abuse, or even rape within the Spanish university context, she will come across a great deal of obstacles if she tries to report it. Our universities do not have a protocol with which or places to report these situations, because up until recently, they have ignored and/or silenced this social curse as it was not a part of our reality.

To break the silence about something that anyhow appears to be obvious (providing that there are a lot of people who are aware of at least one case of gender violence which is kept quiet) implies facing many powers and patriarchal

hierarchies which have been imposed. Because of this and despite the fact that this awareness exists, no one had dared to raise his or her voice on this matter.

SAFO Women's Group, along with the research program that Pato was developing, have been doing research related to gender violence for some time. On the one hand they look at what the reasons are behind this violence, and on the other they look at the international actions which have been implemented in this area. There is an extensive body of research which demonstrates that gender violence exists in all social sectors and among all age groups, and is also present in university campuses (Oliver & Valls, 2004). Recent studies show that, increasingly, it is younger and more educated women who end up experiencing gender violence, which is also present on university campuses (Strauss, 2004). This situation, however, is not often reported in higher education institutions. **Gross, Winslett, Roberts and Gohm (2006) found that out of the 246 college women who were interviewed** and had experienced gender violence, only 4 of them had actually described the event to the police. In many of these universities mechanisms are being created or already exist to help deal with these types of situations and to help actively support the victims, as well as providing mechanisms for condemning the aggressors. Along these lines, researchers in this field agree that support networks are a positive measure, since they have helped to assist the victims to a greater extent (Grauerholz, Gottfried, Stohl & Gabin, 1999).

In the case of Spanish universities, the silence on this matter is so well established that it is provoking a huge personal and intellectual exhaustion to SAFO Women's Group, as it also did to the director of the research center, who supported us in our proposals, and also to Pato who shared our concerns. In 1994, Ramon Flecha – with the support of CREA's female researchers – sent a worried letter to the University, where he stated the need to face this issue as was being done in other universities internationally; the answer was silence. Since then, we have not stopped being concerned about studying this issue and proposing research projects within which this issue can be addressed. For the first time in Spain, there are now two studies that deal with this topic: "Gender Violence in Spanish Universities" (2005-2008), funded by the Spanish Women's Institute and the Ministry for Work and Social Affairs, and "**Gender Violence in the University Context? Facts, Forms and Ways to Overcome it**" (2005-2006), funded by the Department of Education and Research of the Catalan Government and the Catalan Women's Institute. Both studies are led by Rosa Valls, a feminist from our women's group. Pato was also a member of the research team in both of these projects.

Both research projects share the same goal: to provide Spanish universities with mechanisms to measure and prevent the gender violence which happens there. They will pass a questionnaire to the university population and collate measures which have been successful in other universities worldwide. With this research and the work developed we are opening up paths for reflection and dialogue towards zero tolerance for situations in which gender inequality is the basis

for relationships. In CREA and in the SAFO Women's Group we want to collaborate to fight for a better world – as Pato used to say, for a world which is more egalitarian and where everyone can raise their voice with no fear of reprisals or defamation. We are aware of the fact that this is not the situation currently. However we are also aware, through women's stories and women's movements which have preceded us and paid a price for their struggle such as being condemned and even put in prison (Elisabeth Cady Stanton and Lucrecia Mott for the Seneca Falls Declaration, 1848; Mary Wollstonecraft, 1792; Olimpia de Gouges, 1791; Sappho of Lesbos, etc.) of the fact that it is possible to change chauvinistic situations such as the ones which these women had to live through and changed.

## Solidarity: Support from Society

Besides the two aforementioned projects, some SAFO researchers are currently leading other projects related to gender violence. Among them we can highlight “Secondary Education Schools and education in values: proposals for gender violence prevention” (2006-2007), funded by the European Commission through the Daphne Program (which targets violence against children, young people and women, Directorate General of Justice, Freedom and Security). We have already completed two studies along the same line: “Education in Values Towards the Prevention of Gender Violence in Secondary Schools” (2004-2005) funded by the Department of Education and Research of the Catalan Government and “Prevention of Gender Violence in Educational Contexts Through New Forms of School Organization”(2005), funded by the Women's Institute of the Catalan Government. Other colleagues within SAFO are also carrying out projects based on the principle of preventive socialization and publishing about them. One example is the book *Aprendiendo para el amor o para la violencia. Las relaciones en las discotecas* [Learning to love or to violence. Relationships in nightclubs] (2006), in which Elena Duque proposes from a feminist perspective a way in which the feminist movement could contribute new actions to help eradicate this situation.

One of the main reasons why SAFO and the rest of CREA members continue to move forward with this type of research is due to the active and united support they receive from society. Last year a solidarity campaign for CREA helped to stop the defamation to which we are subject. At the same time, there is an emerging social context which is favorable to our research lines: in 2004 Spain passed the first Act Against Gender Violence to exist in Europe. This Act situates Spain as the leader in defending legislation oriented towards ending patriarchal societies. Now Catalonia (Spanish autonomous region) is in the process of developing its own Act, for which Pato's research and the participation of SAFO in the Unitary Platform Against Gender Violence set a significant standard. This Act works from the perspective of preventative socialization. Finally, the government also approved an act on “programs for equality” which directly addresses universities,

insisting that they create mechanisms to equalize the positions of men and women working in universities.

In SAFO, by following international guidelines but also taking advantage of the favorable environment in our country, we have already been working for a long time on this change that society is now demanding. Besides, this work made it possible for some of our researchers to now be principal investigators or publish internationally with authors such as Judith Butler and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim. Driven by this social and scientific concern, we proposed to the rest of CREA members that we should take a public stance against gender violence, and they accepted that the following text should be included in the center's ethical code:

Faced with gender violence, each and every member of CREA would like to contribute, to the maximum possible extent, towards its eradication. For this reason, we are committed to zero tolerance for abuse, as has also been asked for by various organizations. We believe that it is essential that (1) we should always position ourselves in favor of the victim and never in favor of the aggressor and (2) that we should collaborate with the victim in order to describe or report all the cases which are brought to our knowledge, whether they are close by or far away, with the aim of improving quality of life for everyone, and above all for those women who have been victims of abuse.

All of these initiatives are helping to break the silence in Spanish universities. It was necessary to open up Pandora's box and Pato contributed towards that, despite its implications to his own well being.

## Notes

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